

ARTICLE APPEARED
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WASHINGTON TIMES
6 June 1986

PRUDEN ON POLITICS

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Searching out Israeli 'spies'

If you were looking for a virgin, The Washington Post might be the last place on your list of prospective vestal hide-outs.

What other explanation is there for The Post's remarkable attempt to portray the Israelis as a hostile foreign power, determined to cover the United States with a vast and shadowy network of spies, moles, and evil-doers, paid to pry out precious secrets of state?

The Post's point men in this exercise — including Don Oberdorfer, the man who first broke the story of how Ronald Reagan would trash "star wars" as a bargaining chip at Geneva — might be accused of merely bashing Israel, if we didn't all know better.

Some people, noting that this Page One campaign to make the Israelis look like the Japanese on the eve of Pearl Harbor was begun during two celebrated spy trials, are unkind enough to imagine that the timing is not a coincidence.

The cynicism of Washington is an ugly thing to behold.

The great expose began on Saturday, when The Post led the paper with the "revelations" that the United States is "pressing" the Israelis on the Pollard spy case. Wow! The unsuspecting reader, peering through the plexiglass cover on the vending box, trying to decide where to spend his quarter, might have been tempted.

If he were foolish enough to spend his money there, he would have got a story that was well cooked, and somewhat less than met the eye. The story looked to have been written almost entirely from the clips, "freshened" with "quotes" from "U.S. officials."

There's nothing inherently wrong with blind sources, given the secrecy with which official Washington conducts its business, but a reader might expect a little substance in a story that shrieks like this from the front page, surrounded by stories about the Ronald Pelton trial and the "softer" White House line on prosecuting newspapers that print security leaks.

The editors at The Post apparently thought so, too. Yesterday, as the campaign against Israel continued, The Post came up with hard facts and an on-the-record source.

Israeli intelligence sources, the newspaper reported breathlessly, were "more active than anyone but the KGB . . . They were targeted on the United States about half the time and on Arab countries about half the time."

The source for this bombshell was a top U.S. intelligence expert. Well, not exactly a top intelligence expert, but a top man at the Justice Department. Well, he's not actually there any longer, because he recently retired. Well, maybe not recently, but it was within the decade.

The Post further uncovered a "secret" document from the CIA — not yet 10 years old! — that notes that "two of Israel's first three intelligence priorities involve the United States." The first, naturally, are the Arab states. But the next priorities — listed just next to the perfidious Arabs — were "collection of information on secret U.S. policy or decisions, if any, concerning Israel" and the "collection of scientific intelligence in the United States and other developed countries."

Not only that, some of the Israeli intelligence gathering "involved leaks of classified information to Israeli agents by Americans who were pro-Israel but were not paid agents like Pollard." (We know how The Post feels about receiving leaked information).

This is news? Would Israel do such a thing as send agents to the United States to find out what was going on here? Would the British? The French? The Canadians? The Vatican? Would the United States send agents to Israel, to London, Paris, Ottawa and Rome to do the same thing?

You have to imagine that The Post, which is easily spooked by a lot of things in the modern world, *thinks* this stuff is news. Otherwise, you'd have to imagine that they just want to beat up on the Jews.